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SUBJECT: USCIRF URGES GVN TO EASE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN
KHMER BUDDHIST PROVINCE

REF: (A) HCMC 0234 (B) HCMC 0520

HO CHI MIN 00001236 001.2 OF 002

Summary

1. (SBU) The USCIRF delegation, on the final leg of their 12-day long assessment of religious freedom in Vietnam, visited Soc Trang to examine issues pertaining to the Mekong Delta province's significant Khmer Buddhist population. The delegation, which included Commissioner Leonard Leo and two staffers, met with the Chairman of the Soc Trang People's Committee, members of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha (VBS) Executive Council, and the head monk of the Pra Sat Kong Temple. USCIRF focused attention on two main issues in Soc Trang: the imprisonment of four Khmer Buddhist monks following a February 2007 protest and the establishment of additional Pali language schools. End summary.

USCIRF Expresses Skepticism About February Protest, Urges
Amnesty For Imprisoned Monks

2. (SBU) Commissioner Leo opened the meeting with People's Committee Chairman Huynh Thanh Hiep by acknowledging improvements in religious freedom in Vietnam over the past few years, as evidenced by church re-openings and increased dialogue between the government and religious groups. He said there remained, however, several outstanding issues that needed to be addressed in order to achieve full reform. He focused attention on two main issues in Soc Trang: the imprisonment of four Khmer Buddhist monks following a protest in February 2007 (reftels) and the establishment of additional Pali language schools.

3. (SBU) Recounting the official version of the February 2007 protest, Chairman Hiep blamed the incident on a misunderstanding over a minor traffic incident involving a Khmer Buddhist monk riding with an unlicensed motorbike driver. Hiep said he was very sorry about the case, but emphasized that the incident was an issue of public order, not religion. In response, Commissioner Leo said he found it "troubling" and "hard to believe" that 200 monks and laypeople would protest over what officials called a minor traffic incident. The demonstration, according to the Commissioner, indicated the level of skepticism felt by the Khmer Buddhist monks towards government action, which he associated with a history of ethnic and religious tension between the GVN and the ethnic Khmer in Vietnam. To address this issue, the Commissioner proposed increased dialogue between the Khmer Buddhist community and the GVN. Moreover, USCIRF urged the GVN to grant amnesty to the four monks arrested for their involvement in the February 2007 protest. Chairman Hiep stated that the government would consider amnesty if the monks demonstrated good behavior in prison but claimed that

return to their temples was a matter for religious leaders to decide.

¶4. (SBU) The Commissioner also raised the point that there was significant interest in establishing more language and culture schools and asked that the GVN ease restrictions on the creation of additional language schools. Allowing the establishment of additional Pali/Khmer schools, said USCIRF, would demonstrate the GVN's interest in preserving Khmer culture and religion as well as promote goodwill within the ethnic Khmer community. USCIRF cited the closure of at least one language school in the past year, a point which Hiep ignored. The Chairman answered that in addition to the Pali Supplementary School, all 92 Khmer pagodas also taught Pali; any additional schools would need to be approved by the Ministry of Training and Education.

¶5. (SBU) During the People's Committee meeting, USCIRF also engaged in a lengthy hypothetical discussion about whether the GVN would allow Khmer Buddhists to separate from the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, drawing an analogy to Christian Protestants. The Chairman responded by firmly asserting that "there is only one VBS" uniting all Buddhist sects in the country and that this issue had never before been raised in the province. After the meeting, PolOff raised concerns that the hypothetical was misinterpreted as fact by Vietnamese officials. Commissioner Leo immediately clarified the situation with the Hanoi CRA representative, stating the question was purely hypothetical and had not been raised by any group or individual.

Khmer Monks Carefully Adhere To The Official Party Line

¶6. (SBU) USCIRF met with several representatives from the VBS Executive Board, including Duong Nhan, a Khmer monk and rector of the Pali Supplementary School. The monks declined to answer USCIRF questions about whether more Pali language schools were needed in the province, instead reciting statistics about the existing schools and pagodas. When asked about the recent closure of a Pali school, a VBS representative stated that the school was closed during festivals only. In response to USCIRF's

HO CHI MIN 00001236 002.2 OF 002

question about the four imprisoned monks, Duong stated that he approved their disrobing because they had violated the rules of the pagoda and school. Duong claimed that the four monks had been "incited by expat groups" to use religion to urge people to demonstrate and disrupt public order. He said he would allow them to return to the school if they became "good people after re-education."

¶7. (SBU) Lastly, USCIRF had a private meeting at Pra Sat Kong Temple, located about 30 minutes from the provincial capital and selected by USCIRF because of reported house arrests. The head monk enthusiastically received the delegation and expressed his deep gratitude for their interest in the Khmer community. He explained that the GVN had recently provided funding for the construction of a new religious school on the temple grounds, in addition to giving scholarships to novice monks to study. The pagoda was responsible for selecting the monks and registering their names with local authorities each new school year. The monk reported that he and his fellow monks were free to go anywhere in the city, and that there was no police presence around the temple.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) In his final debrief with the CG, Leo suggested giving additional support for the preservation of Pali/Khmer culture, as a means of reducing both religious and ethnic tension in the province.
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